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ABSTRACT

An overview of the research literature reviews studies on the effectiveness of sentence-combining (SC) exercises in helping English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students integrate their knowledge of grammar into their writing. In the 1960s, Kellog Hunt published a series of articles that explored the relationship between SC and writing skills. Researchers, since the 1960's, have explored this relationship and have found that SC exercises contribute to accelerated syntactic growth. Research in SC thus far has focused on the remedial college-aged native speaker of English, and a point of debate concerns whether or not this research is generalizable to second language students. Both non-ESL and ESL-based studies on the effectiveness of SC in developing writing skills are discussed. The overview of the research literature concludes that although the available research fails to take into account the accuracy with which students use SC skills, enough evidence has been collected to indicate that SC can be effective in helping both native-English-speaking and ESL students use more complex syntax. (DJD)

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Sentence-Combining in the Secondary ESL Classroom -- A Review of the Research Literature

By

Jeffrey K. Brant

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Professor Madalienne Peters
ED 200
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Introduction:

High school English teachers have long sought methods to improve their students' writing. Some have advocated strict adherence to a prescriptive grammatical approach; others maintain that free expression and stream-of-consciousness writing represent a less stressful path to stylish sentences. The problem is compounded when the students' native language is not English. The ESL students' writing, when it is not replete with run-ons, is too often characterized by low-level syntax -- mostly simple, one-clause sentences, lacking phrasal and clausal modifiers. Although the students may be able to read and fully comprehend more complex sentence patterns, traditional approaches have proven ineffectual at transferring this knowledge to writing.

Statement of the Problem:

How effective is sentence combining (SC) in enabling secondary English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students to integrate their knowledge of grammar into their writing?

Rationale:

According to Rose (1983) sentence combining exercises have been in English composition textbooks for over 100 years. In the sixties, however, a new framework for understanding the process sprang from generative transformational grammar; specifically, this theory holds that complex sentences evolve in the language speaker or writer's mind through a series of "transformations," which, among other things, "embed" simple sentences under the main clause. Simply put, the natural process of mature language production is a process of sentence combining.

Background and Need:

In the mid-sixties, Kellog Hunt published a series of articles which explored the relationship between sentence combining and writing skills at three different grade levels. Since then, scores of researchers have explored this relationship and found that SC exercises do indeed contribute to accelerated syntactic growth, especially in students who "lag behind" in these areas (Haswell, 1981). Researchers in the teaching of English

at all levels for more than twenty years have spent countless hours designing, carrying out, and analyzing studies on sentence combining. Such expenditures of time and money imply that professionals in education consider this an extremely important area of research. Nevertheless, the research has thus far focused on the remedial college-aged native speaker of English. Researchers have neglected one segment of the student population who, it would seem, have the most to gain from sentence combining: secondary ESL students.

Review of the Literature:

It is a point of debate whether or not research in the effectiveness of SC conducted on native speakers of English is generalizable to second-language students. Larsen-Freeman (1978) and Zamel (1980) contend that too many researchers take this connection for granted. Others (Kameen, 1978; Ney, 1980) argue that inasmuch as sentence composition is a skill that must be learned and practiced, ESL students can benefit in all the ways that native speakers can, and then some. There are very few research studies which have been conducted solely on the

ESL population. It would be unwise to ignore first-language research altogether. The review of literature which follows is divided into two parts: ESL and non-ESL studies.

Non-ESL Studies:

Haswell (1981) studied the effects of SC on ninety-nine college freshmen level students. The sample consisted of five sections which were already in place at the university: three experimental and two control. Although he did find that the students in the experimental group wrote more complex sentences, he pointed out that the students who began with the lowest skills accounted for most of the gain. Haswell implies that better students may not benefit significantly from SC exercises. One must pause and consider the value of this criticism. Is it not always the students lacking the most skills who gain the most from effective instruction?

Pedersen (1977) researched the effects of SC on the writing of seventh graders. The sample was not random, but judged to be "normal." Three classes were chosen.

Pedersen found that the students made gains in several areas. He counted the number of words and clauses per T-unit, which stands for "terminable unit" because it can be punctuated with terminal marks such as period or exclamation point. The number of T-units is the number of main clauses with or without subordinate clauses. Thus a compound sentence consists of two T-units, but a complex sentence consists of just one. Pedersen found that the experimental group improved not only in T-unit and clause length, but also in idea development, "semantic fluency," and overall quality.

While Cooper's study (1981) did not use ESL students, it was designed to measure the effects of SC on second language students -- university level students of French, German, and Spanish. Students who completed several different types of SC exercises were compared with control groups who participated in the "regular program": grammar, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Judging by the number of words and clauses per T-unit, the gains in syntactic fluency made by both the experimental and control groups were statistically

significant, but those of the experimental group were greater. Also, the final essays of the experimental group were overwhelmingly judged to be "better" than those of the control group in both grammatical correctness and style.

ESL Studies:

The closest study to secondary ESL students is McKee (1982), who used "university-bound" students who scored between 400 and 650 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). In an eight-week study which did not use a random sample, McKee found that the students who did SC exercises improved their writing across the board. Students who wrote only simple sentences at the beginning of the study were able to increase the number of clauses per T- unit by a statistically significant percentage. The students who started out combining too many sentences learned how to appropriately reduce the number of embedded clauses. Thus, McKee found that all students were able to improve their sentences: shortening them if they were too long, lengthening them and increasing their complexity if they were too short

and basic.

Ney and Fillerup (1980) hypothesized that students would improve both the syntax and "over-all quality" of their writing samples. The results are encouraging, but they must be read with skepticism because of the inadequate size of the sample: twenty-four students. Moreover, Ney utilized existing class sections rather than providing a random sample. The study found that students who performed SC exercises did in fact increase the complexity of their syntax. The "overall quality" of their writing, however, could not be distinguished from that of the control group.

In contrast with these researchers, all of whom found some benefit to SC exercises, is the work of Larkin (1978). The results of her study, however, are highly questionable, by her own admission due to severe attrition in the experimental group. Nevertneless, it is notable that the writing of the experimental group actually worsened; that is, students in the experimental group wrote snorter sentences with fewer words per T-unit. They used fewer relative clauses than the control

group. Something, one suspects, went awry to drive away half of the experimental group. Her results must be viewed in this light.

Zamel (1980) questions the usefulness of SC exercises in the ESL classroom; in particular, she cautions against its overuse. Without a research study to support her assertion, she states that ESL students do not possess the linguistic ability needed to make sense of the exercises and apply it to their writing assignments. Furthermore, SC exercises ignore the real rhetorical concerns of the writing process, for example, facing the blank page. While she admits that SC has a place in the curriculum, she fears that too many teachers see it as the be-all and end-all of the writing curriculum. She would rather it remain just one component.

Finally, Larsen-Freeman (1978) pointed out a flaw in the measurement tools used by virtually all SC researchers during the last twenty-five years. By tabulating the number of words per clause, the number of words per T-unit, and the number of clauses per T-unit,

the studies have left out one indispensable factor: the number of mistakes! She recommends that all future studies incorporate the measurement Error-free T-unit, or EFT. Obviously, if progress is to be measured, it must by definition be progress away from sloppiness and inaccuracy. Larsen-Freeman has pointed out a flaw in the research that represents a specimen of this sloppiness: it is a blatant mistake to ignore mistakes. Thus, Larsen-Freeman calls into question the statistical validity of virtually every research study conducted using SC.

Discussion:

In light of the fact that there have been no research studies conducted specifically on secondary ESL students, all conclusions must be tentative. Even the available research fails, by and large, to take into account the accuracy with which students use SC skills. Nevertheless, enough evidence has been collected to suggest that SC can be effective in helping students, both native and second language speakers, to use more complex syntax. As with any part of any curriculum,

teachers need to acknowledge that SC exercises are not a panacea; other methods must be developed and employed to reinforce and strengthen the skills that the students learn. Finally, SC exercises may themselves be refined as educational researchers build upon the foundation of existing research, targeting and sampling for their studies more specific populations such as secondary ESL students.

About the Author:

Jeffrey Brant graduated from UC Berkeley in 1987 with a degree in linguistics. He received his teaching credential in secondary English from Dominican College in San Rafael where he is pursuing his M.A. with a specialization in English as a Second Language. Mr. Brant teaches English composition and literature to international students full time at San Domenico, a private high school in San Anselmo, California. Mr. Brant's research in writing instruction for ESL students is an outgrowth of his fascination with language and his unceasing dedication to excellence in pedagogy.

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